

To the Source!



How do you study the past, a time that no longer exists? By referring to objects, records, and even people that have survived into the present. Artifacts that existed close in time, place, and experience to the topic being researched are called primary sources. Records that interpret primary sources are called secondary sources.

Consider the following. Are they primary or secondary sources?

1. You're researching Alexander Graham Bell, credited as inventor of the telephone. By chance, you find a book about Bell's life in your attic. The book was published in 1936, and the author does not seem to have known Bell in person. Can you consider the book a primary source in your research on Alexander Graham Bell's life?
 Yes No
2. Instead of researching Alexander Graham Bell, you've decided you want to research telephone use before World War II. The book you found in the attic has many asides about what the author thinks of telephones and what she's learned about them while researching Bell. Can you cite the book as a primary source in your research about telephone use?
 Yes No
3. You're taking a break from reading, and decide to watch a documentary about the telephone instead. Onscreen, two actors perform a scene portraying a man making a phone call in the 1920s and an operator taking the call. The caller expresses frustration at how long it takes for the operator to connect the call. Can you consider the actor's words a primary source on phone use before World War II?
 Yes No
4. After finishing the documentary, you decide you want to know more about what using a phone was like before World War II. You write to a great-aunt who was a little girl in the 1930s. She responds with a letter reminiscing about how much technology has changed and telling you a story about a friend's family business that had a phone. Can you cite her words as a primary source on phones before World War II?
 Yes No

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